[Afternoon in a Pushcart Peddlers' Colony]

Beliefs and Customs - Folkstuff 9

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Frank Byrd

ADDRESS 224 W. 135th St. New York City

DATE December 7, 1938

SUBJECT AFTERNOON IN A PUSHCART PEDDLERS' COLONY

1. Date and time of interview Reported by staff-writer — based on personal contacts and observations, Harlem River waterfront, West Bank.

2. Place of interview

3. Name and address of informant Evans Drake and “Oliver” (mechanics helper) (see text)

4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.

5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Frank Byrd

ADDRESS 224 West 135th Street, NYC

DATE December 7, 1938

SUBJECT AFTERNOON IN A PUSHCART PEDDLERS' COLONY

It was snowing and, shortly after noontime, the snow changed to sleet and beat a tattoo against the rocks and board shacks that had been carelessly thrown together on the west bank of the Harlem. It was windy too and the cold blasts that came in from the river sent the men shivering for cover behind their shacks where some of them had built huge bonfires to-ward off the icy chills that swept down from the hills above.

Some of them, unable to stand it any longer, went below into the crudely furnished cabins that were located in the holds of some old abandoned barges that lay half in, half out of the water. But the men did not seem to mind. Even the rotting barges afforded them some kind of shelter. It was certainly better than nothing, not to mention the fact that it was their home; address, the foot of 133rd Street at Park Avenue on the west bank of the Harlem River; depression residence of a little band of part-time pushcart peddlers whose cooperative colony is one of the most unique in the history of New York City.

These men earn their living by cruising the streets long before daylight, collecting old automobile parts, pasteboard, paper, rags, rubber, magazines, brass, iron, steal, old clothes or anything they can find that is saleable as junk. They wheel their little pushcarts around exploring cellars, garbage cans and refuse heaps. When they have a load, they turn their footsteps in the direction of the American Junk Dealers, Inc., whose site of wholesale and retail operations is located directly opposite the pushcart colony at 134th Street and Park Avenue. Of the fifty odd colonists, many are ex-carpenters, painters, brick-masons, auto-mechanics, upholsterers, plumbers and even an artist or two.

Most of the things the men collect they sell, but once in awhile they run across something useful to themselves, like auto parts, pieces of wire, or any electrical equipment, especially in view of the fact that there are two or three electrical engineers in the group.

Joe Elder, a tall, serious minded Negro, was the founder of the group that is officially known as the National Negro Civil Association. Under his supervision, electrically inclined members of the group set up a complete power plant that supplied all the barges and shacks with electric light. It was constructed with an old automobile engine and an electrical generator bought from the City of New York.

For a long time it worked perfectly. After awhile, when a city inspector came around, he condemned it and the shacks were temporarily without light. It was just as well, perhaps, since part of 3 the colony was forced to vacate the site in order to make room for a mooring spot for a coal company that rented a section of the waterfront.

A rather modern and up-to-date community hall remains on the site, however. One section of it is known as the gymnasium and many pieces of apparatus are to be found there. There are also original oil paintings in the other sections known as the library and recreation room. Here, one is amazed (to say the least) by the comfortable divans, lounges, bookshelves and, of all things, a drinking fountain. The water is purchased from the City and pumped directly to the hall and barges by a homemade, electrically

motored pump. In the recreation room there are also three pianos. On cold nights when the men want companionship and relaxation, they bring the women there and dance to the accompaniment of typical Harlem jazz... jazz that is also supplied by fellow colonists. (For what Negro is there who is not able to extract a tune of some sort from every known instrument?)

After being introduced to some of the boys, we went down into Oliver's barge. It was a shaky, weather-beaten and sprawling, like the other half-dozen that surrounded it. Inside, he had set up an old iron range and attached a pipe to it that carried the smoke out and above the upper deck. On top of the iron grating that had been laid across the open hole on the back of the stove were some spare-ribs that had been generously seasoned with salt, pepper, sage and hot-sauce. Later I discovered a faint flavor of mace in them. The small and pungency of spices filled the low ceilinged room with an appetizing aroma. The faces of the men were alight and hopeful with anticipation.

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There was no real cause for worry, however, since Oliver had more than enough for everybody. Soon he began passing out tin plates for everyone. It makes my mouth water just to think of it. When we had gobbled up everything in sight, all of us sat back in restful contemplation puffing on our freshly lighted cigarettes. Afterwards there was conversation, things the men elected to talk about of their own accord.

“You know one thing,” Oliver began, “ain't nothin' like a man being his own boss. Now take today, here we is wit' plenty to eat, ha'f a jug of co'n between us and nairy a woman to fuss aroun' wantin' to wash up dishes or mess aroun' befo' duh grub gits a chance to settle good.”

“Dat sho is right,” Evans Drake agreed. He was Oliver's helper when there were trucks to be repaired. “A 'oman ain't good fuh nuthin' but one thing.”

The conversation drifted along until I was finally able to ease in a query or two.

“Boys,” I ventured, “how is it that none of you ever got on Home Relief? You can get a little grub out of it, at least, and that would take a little of the load off you, wouldn't it?”

At this they all rose up in unanimous protest.

“Lis'en,” one of them said, “befo' I'd take Home Relief I'd go out in duh street an' hit same bastard oveh de haid an' take myse'f some'n'. I know one uv duh boys who tried to git it an' one of dem 5 uppity little college boys ovah dere talked tuh him lak he was some damn jailbird or some'n'. If it had been me, I'd a bust hell outn' him an' walked outa duh place. What duh hell do we wants wid relief anyhow? We is all able-bodied mens an' can take it. We can make our own livin's.”

This, apparently, was the attitude of every man there. They seemed to take fierce pride in the fact that every member of Joe Elder's National Negro Civil Association (it used to be called the National Negro Boat Terminal) was entirely self-supporting. They even had their own unemployment insurance fund that provided an income for any member of the group who was ill and unable to work. Each week the men give a small part of their earnings toward this common fund and automatically agree to allow a certain amount to any temporarily incapacitated member. In addition to that, they divide among themselves their ill brother's work and provide a day and night attendant near his shack if his illness is at all serious.

After chatting awhile longer with them, I finally decided to leave.

“Well boys,” I said, getting up, “I guess I'll have to be shoving off. Thanks, a lot, for the ribs. See you again sometime.”

Before leaving, however, I gave them a couple of packs of cigarettes I had on me in part payment for my dinner.

“O. K.” they said. “Come ovah ag'in some time. Some Sat'd'y. Maybe we'll have a few broads (women) and a little co'n.”

“Thanks.”

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Outside the snow and sleet had turned to rain and the snow that had been feathery and white was running down the river bank in brown rivulets of slush and mud. It was a little warmer but the damp air still had a penetrating sharpness to it. I shuddered, wrapped my muffler a little tighter and turned my coat collar up about my ears.

There was wind in the rain, and behind me lay the jagged outline of the ramshackle dwellings. I hated to think of what it would be like, living in them when there was a scarcity of wood or when the fires went out.